

## A PLACE IN TIME

The sun was about two hand spans above blue waters of the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Southern California. Mark walked along the boardwalk holding his grandson's hand. Ahead were his children, watching their own children, pointing out starfish and sea shells. He heard the breaking waves, the gulls calling to each other, and watched them wheel and dive at the water. Susan pushed the youngest grandchild in a stroller.

Coming toward them a woman held a man's hand. He was too far away to make out her features but there was something familiar about the way she walked. The long hair was grey, but so was his, at least what was left of it. Put the cocoa back in the hair, take forty years away, it could be her. But that was ridiculous. After nearly four decades to bump into her a thousand miles from where they last saw each other?

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It was one of those perfect fall days, the sky a blue so clear and so close you could almost scrape it with your fingernail. The morning had started out crisp but now, at nearly 1:00, it was warm. He was perspiring lightly after crossing campus to the cavernous lecture hall. Class didn't start for ten minutes but the room was filling up. Chem 110 was a popular class, not because everybody liked chemistry but because it was required for the pre-med and other science majors. It was also notorious for weeding out the pretend doctors-to-be. Professor Van Orden seemed to take particular delight in winnowing out those he deemed not suited for a career in science.

An aisle seat was vacant so he took it. That meant no one could sit on his right and bump his elbow. The three seats to his left were also empty. Hopefully they would remain that way. Only five minutes to go, then three, then one. The seats were still unoccupied.

“Excuse me, sorry, can I get by?”

He looked up, trying to keep the annoyance off his face. Dark brown hair framed huge, darker brown eyes. Her skin was still tan from a summer in the sun. A lop-sided, apologetic smile. He stared up at her.

“That seat,” she motioned with her head, “is it open?”

“Uh, sure, sorry,” he stammered. He fumbled to get up, knocked his books on the floor. He bent down to pick them up just as she knelt down to do the same and their heads collided. Her backpack slipped off her shoulder onto the floor, hitting it with a thud that suggested it was loaded with bricks. They looked up at each other, eyes wide, mouths opening to spill out apologies. Then they both started to laugh.

They were still chuckling to themselves as Professor Van Orden strode to the lectern. Fifty minutes later Mark was still grinning.

“My name’s Carly,” she said, sticking out her hand as the lecture hall emptied.

“Hi, I’m Mark,” he answered, grasping her hand. She had a warm, firm handshake, not the wimpy kind where the palms never meet.

They walked out together. It turned out neither of them had a class that hour so they ended up in the student union building exchanging life stories.

Mark was a local product, born and raised almost literally in the shadow of the university. Carly was an air force brat, having lived all across the United States and only moving to town the month prior when her father was assigned to the base nearby, likely his last post before

retirement. Mark was a sophomore in engineering; Carly a freshman planning to study medical technology. For the moment both were hoping just to survive Chem 110.

After an hour she excused herself, leaving Mark to ponder his next move. The unwritten rules of relationships on campus were complicated. You couldn't ask someone you just met on a date without first having some casual, informal get-togethers (thirty years later his kids would call it "hanging out"), such as they had just had. On the other hand, too many such meetings without a formal date signified that nothing more than being acquaintances was desired. Then, however, if you progressed to dating a whole new world of rules applied. Mark stared at the grounds in his coffee cup as if they held the key to his future.

Finally he sighed. Actually, the next move was up to Carly. If she changed seats in chemistry tomorrow, that would show a lack of interest on her part. Another unwritten rule of college life was you stuck with the seat you picked on the first day of class unless there was good reason to move, such as your neighbor's lack of personal hygiene. Mark didn't think he had anything to worry about in that regard.

At 12:55 the next afternoon Mark was back in his aisle seat, trying to act nonchalant while he scanned the hall for Carly. His heart pounded and his palms were sweaty as he arranged and rearranged his pens and notebook. The minute hand on the clock on the wall inched closer to the 12. Finally, at 12:59 ½, just like yesterday, Carly appeared.

"Is it safe to ask if that seat is taken?" A much bigger but still lop-sided smile covered her face.

Mark jumped up, avoiding a repeat of yesterday's fiasco and let her in.

Their relationship progressed successfully through get-togethers to the dating stage. Carly lived with her family north of town in an area that had been farmland and was gradually

being converted to residential. As Mark was preparing to leave for his first date with Carly, his mother asked him where she lived. He gave her Carly's address and started to explain where that was.

"Oh, that's right out by where your aunt Virginia had their place," his mother said.

Wonderful, Mark thought. He well remembered his aunt's place. His uncle raised mink, nasty, foul-smelling, vicious creatures that would bite off an errant finger poked into their cage. His aunt had chickens and he recalled being with his mother while she and her sister slaughtered them. They were a fearsome tag team, his mother catching a chicken, stunning it with a whack to the head and tossing the bird to his aunt at the chopping block, who finished the job with a hatchet. *Whack, chop, whack, chop*. Mark could still see his aunt's blood stained apron, the red flecks on her glasses, and his mother's scratched arms and dusty face. He would keep this tidbit of local history from Carly until he knew her better.

The highlight of fall quarter was the Christmas dance just before school let out for the holidays. It was a formal affair and Mark rented a tux, complete with frilly shirt and cummerbund. Carly wore a purple satin formal. Her long hair was arranged off her shoulders. They made a handsome couple as they danced in the half-light of the student union building. Carly was coming down with something and they left early. On her doorstep she gamely invited him in, but Mark refused, reaching behind her to open the door and push her inside. He bent down, hoping for a kiss, but Carly didn't look up and their first kiss ended on top of her head.

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They were sitting in her basement watching TV. Mark flipped through the channels.

"What's this," he asked aloud. "*Casablanca*. Never heard of it."

"You've never heard of *Casablanca*?" Carly's eyes were wide.

Mark shrugged. "Should I have?"

"It's only one of the most famous love stories of this century."

Mark rolled his eyes. "You mean like *Gone with the Wind*? That was the worst three hours I ever spent. The only good part was when what's-his-name said, 'frankly my dear, I don't give a damn.' Just like how I felt about the whole movie."

"Rhett Butler. And that movie is a classic. You really need to expand your horizons beyond Dirty Harry."

"OK, but not tonight. I'm not in the mood for a sappy love story."

"*Casablanca* isn't sappy. Please?" she smiled and batted her eyes at Mark. "I'll make popcorn."

Mark sighed. He couldn't resist her when she pulled the big, brown puppy-dog eyes on him.

They sat in the dark staring at the black and white images on the TV, the popcorn bowl on the floor. Carly lay against Mark's chest, his arms wrapped around her. To his surprise, he found he quite liked *Casablanca*, especially the part where Victor Laszlo told the band leader to play *La Marseillaise*. As Renault and Rick walked away from the camera, Carly looked up at Mark.

"Did you like it?" she asked.

"It was OK," he answered. "But I never would have let the girl get away."

"But that's what makes it such a great love story."

"No, this is what makes a great love story," Mark replied. He kissed Carly.

"Mmmm," she said when their lips parted. "Play it again."

"Here's looking at you, kid," Mark responded. Then he kissed her again.

Those two phrases became their code. As they were leaving each other, she'd say, "Play it again." Mark would raise his hand as if clinking an imaginary champagne glass and reply, "here's looking at you, kid."

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"I can't see you tomorrow," Carly said one cold spring day as they stood outside her house.

"Why not?" Mark asked. She looked sad.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just a little thing I need to take care of."

"What kind of a 'thing'?" Mark looked at her closer. Her lower lip quivered and a tear squeezed out of the corner of her eye. She looked down at the ground. Suddenly he was afraid.

"It's a, uh, it's a medical thing." She threw out her hands as if that would explain everything.

"Carly," Mark put his hand under her chin and lifted her head to look into her eyes.

"What medical thing?"

She took a deep breath and half sobbed. Another tear rolled out. Mark waited.

"They found a lump on my breast," she whispered. "They say it's probably just a cyst, benign, that it's not uncommon in women in their late teens and early twenties. They don't think. . . ." her voice trailed off.

"They don't think what?" Mark asked, his gut twisting into a knot.

"They don't think it's cancer." He could barely hear her.

*They don't think it's cancer*, Mark thought. But it could be. He had experienced breast cancer. His aunt, the one who raised him across the street from where Carly lived, died of

breast cancer about eight years ago. For an instant Mark cursed the very ground they were standing on, blaming his aunt's and Carly's maladies on where they lived.

"Can I be there?" he asked.

Carly shook her head. "I'd rather you weren't. I mean, I want to see you and I know you care, but if it's bad, I'll need some time. I'll call you as soon as I know. I promise."

"OK," Mark answered. "I'll be sitting by the phone." He kissed her cheek.

"Play it again," she said, trying to smile.

Mark raised his hand. "Here's looking at you, kid." He kissed her again.

The next day the minutes turned to hours. He tried watching TV, reading the sports page, shooting baskets in the driveway. Even though he knew it would be late afternoon or evening before she called he refused to leave the house. Every half hour or so he picked up the phone to make sure there was a dial tone, then put it down quickly so if she called she wouldn't get a busy signal. When the phone did ring he pounced on it and hovered over his mother until she told whoever was on the line that she would have to call them back. Finally Carly called.

"Hello," Mark said.

"Mark, it's me," as if she had to identify herself.

Mark waited, holding his breath.

"It's ok, it was benign," she started to cry.

"I'll be right there," he said, hanging up before he started crying too.

They sat on the couch in her basement, not speaking, not watching TV. Mark held her, his face in her hair, happy just to be near her, to smell her shampoo, to feel her breathe, to touch her warm skin, to look at her and know that she was whole and well. She fell asleep and he held her all night.

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It was spring of his senior year. Big changes were coming for both of them. Carly's father had been deployed one last time. The Viet Nam war was still going strong and he was sent to Southeast Asia to take command of an air base. He and Carly's mother had made plans to move to Galveston when he finally retired. Her mother had grown up on the gulf and loved the sea. Carly was going down with her brother to help their mom get settled and would return in the fall for her own senior year. Mark was looking ahead at graduate school.

"You'll come visit us this summer," her mother said to Mark one Saturday afternoon. It wasn't a question.

"Of course," Mark answered.

Mark knew it was time to do something about their relationship. The unwritten rules forbade continuing to date once one of them graduated and moved away. Either he had to break off the relationship or solidify it, which meant becoming engaged.

When he went to Galveston he had a diamond ring in his suitcase. Every night he took it out and looked at it, rehearsing how he was going to propose. He knew that he should have asked Carly's father for her hand in marriage but he was on the other side of the world. Mark was unsure about whether to ask Carly's mom in her father's absence, so he didn't.

It was his last night in Texas. They had spent a wonderful week together. Everything was right in Mark's world. He took this as a sign that asking Carly to marry him was the right thing to do. They walked along the sidewalk under the trees. They had just finished eating dinner, the breeze from the gulf was soft, the sea smell wafting over them. Mark stopped under a tree and took Carly's hand.



“Carly,” he said, his rehearsed speech suddenly flying from his mind, “I, uh, have something I’d like to give you.” He pulled the jeweler’s box from his pants pocket and opened the lid, turning it toward her.

Carly gasped, looked up at Mark and then looked back at the ring. “It’s beautiful,” she said, reaching for it. Before she touched it she pulled her hand back. She looked at him, her eyes glistening.

“I can’t accept it.”

Mark stood there, a goofy grin on his face. The possibility that she would refuse had never entered his mind.

“Why?” he asked dumbly.

“Oh, Mark. It’s not the right time anymore. If you had asked me a year ago I would have said yes. Then it would have worked. But not now. You have grad school, I have to finish then I have grad school. It won’t work.” She shook her head and cried softly.

Somehow, he got back home. He couldn’t remember any details of the trip after that night. Whether Carly ever told her mother, whether her mother knew before he left, he didn’t know. He didn’t remember the drive to the airport, the flight home or even how he got from the airport to his own home.

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He threw himself into grad school, moving away from home, setting up his first apartment on his own, meeting new people, taking on new challenges. He and Carly continued to write and occasionally talk on the phone, but the letters and conversations were just travelogues of what each of them was doing. When he did go home and they got together the conversation was strained. He ended each conversation or date angry but within hours he missed

her. Pride kept him from calling her back the next day and begging that she take him back. As the school year wore on she found more excuses not to see him.

It was spring again, her senior year. She, too, would be moving to a distant city after graduation. Although they had not formally ended the relationship, had Mark not still been smitten with her he would have known it was over. Instead of accepting defeat gracefully he made one last, desperate attempt.

They sat on the couch in her apartment, the same couch that used to be in her parents' basement. They watched TV and he held her, the way he used to do, and she lay against him the way she used to do. Her hair smelled like it used to smell, her touch was like it used to be. But things weren't as they used to be. He knew they couldn't say goodbye in the warmth of the night. The cold light of morning would bring the end.

About 1:30 in the morning Carly told him he needed to leave, that she needed to have some time alone to make a decision. Mark promised to be back in the morning. Buoyed by false hope he left.

It was about nine when he went to her apartment. She opened the door but didn't invite him in. Her eyes were red and her hands shook ever so slightly, but there was no tremor in her voice.

"Mark, it's over," she said before he could speak. "We had something special that I'll never forget, but our time is past."

"Carly, we can make it work. We can have a long-distance relationship and after I finish grad school in another year we can get married and I'll move to wherever you are."

She shook her head. "No, Mark, that's not what I want. I'm sorry, I wish it could be different, but it can't." She looked down at the ground in silence.

Mark turned. There was nothing more to say, not even goodbye. He felt the sun warm on his back as he walked to his car, he heard the gravel crunch under his shoes and he smelled the earthy smell of spring. He thought there might be tears in her eyes but he didn't look back.

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Mark finished graduate school. Along the way he met Susan. She was wonderful for him, supported him in everything he did. They had four children. Life went on, so Mark thought.

After about five years of marriage he began to dream of Carly. The dreams were always the same. They were back in college and he wanted to ask her out but he realized he couldn't. He was married to Susan. He wondered what the dreams meant. Was he unfaithful to Susan because he dreamed of Carly? Did he love Susan as much as he could have, as much as he should have? When he held Susan in his arms, was he subconsciously holding Carly? Was he cheating Susan and himself out of something more, something better than they had because he hadn't given his heart to her completely?

With the advent of the Internet Mark did a few halfhearted searches for Carly. He knew she had gotten married, knew her married name. The searches revealed nothing except solicitations from various online companies who for a fee promised to track down anyone, anywhere. Mark didn't do that. He was a dog chasing a car. What would he do if he caught it?

He knew that there had never been closure with Carly. So he wrote a letter to her in the hope that simply by putting words down on paper he could exorcise her ghost.

*Dear Carly,*

*You might think I've been angry all these years because you spurned my offer of marriage. (He smiled as he wrote this). I was hurt at first, incredibly hurt. How can one not be*

*hurt when he is rejected after offering his life to another? But the anger came later. It wasn't at you; it was at me. I handled the last year or so of our relationship badly. I never told you that I loved you. After all we had been through, all we had shared, I just assumed you knew. So let me tell you now that I did. I loved you. It wasn't a mature love but it was pretty good stuff for a 22 year-old kid who had never had a deep relationship with a woman before. I asked you to marry me without us ever having talked about it. For that I'm sorry.*

*I want you to know that I have nothing but good memories of the three years we spent together. I'm sure there were some bad times but I don't remember them. The good I probably remember as better than it was but those were three of the best years of my life. I'm not sure if any of this matters to you now, but I need to say it, even 30 years too late. If I'm honest with myself, I'm writing this because I didn't say it in 1973 and I've regretted it ever since.*

He put the letter in an envelope, wrote her name on it and put it in his desk drawer. It was still there.

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He heard his daughter call out to her son. The boy let go of his hand and ran to his mother. There were forty feet between him and the couple. The woman took off her sunglasses and tossed her head. She put the sunglasses on top of her head and looked toward the ocean, toward Mark.

There was no mistaking the brown eyes. There were lines around the eyes but they were as deep and dark as they had been that day in Chem 110. Her eyes met his and she smiled a lopsided smile.

"Play it again," she mouthed the words.

Mark raised his hand. *Here's looking at you, kid*, he thought and walked on.